The Occasional Papers

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The Lymington Society and Residents' Association is an association of residents and all those who wish :

- to protect the character of our historic town;
- to ensure that new development is in keeping;
- to encourage the maintenance and improvement of civic amenities;
- to provide a forum where residents can express views on such subjects publicly.

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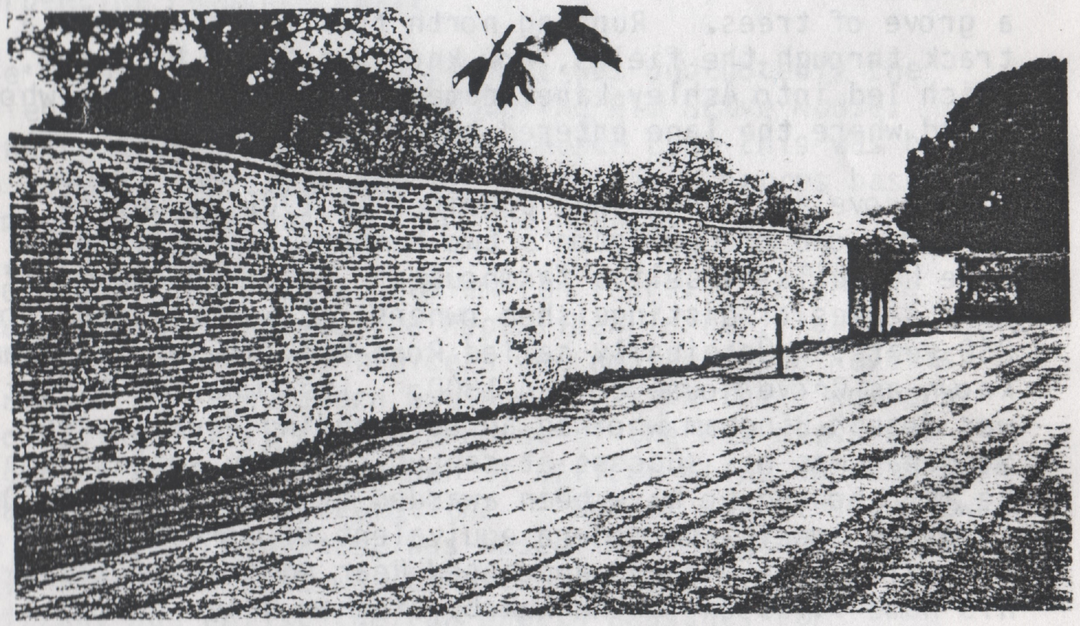
LYMINGTON'S WAVY WALLS



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LYMINGTON'S WAVY WALLS

Early maps of Lymington show an avenue of lime trees running westwards from the present junction of Captains Row and Nelson Place, alongside what is now Grove Road. Known as the Rope Walk it was one of several stretches of ground used for the twisting of rope to meet the requirements of ships in the river. The avenue ended in a grove of trees. Running north from the trees was a track through the fields, now known as Grove Pastures, which led into Ashley Lane, named after John Ashley who lived where the lane entered the High Street.

This grove and avenue was acquired in 1705 by George Burrard, one of Lymington's two Members of Parliament. Here he built himself a farmhouse. Enlarged and modified by a series of distinguished owners, it was to stand for 250 years. Originally called Rope-Walk House, it became known as Grove House around 1800. Its owner at this time was Joseph Bingham who had an outstanding Naval career. So great was his success at capturing enemy vessels that he is reported to have been awarded no less than £ 40,000 in prize money, the modern equivalent of more than £ 2 million . He was appointed Rear Admiral in 1819. His name lives on in the nearby Bingham Drive.

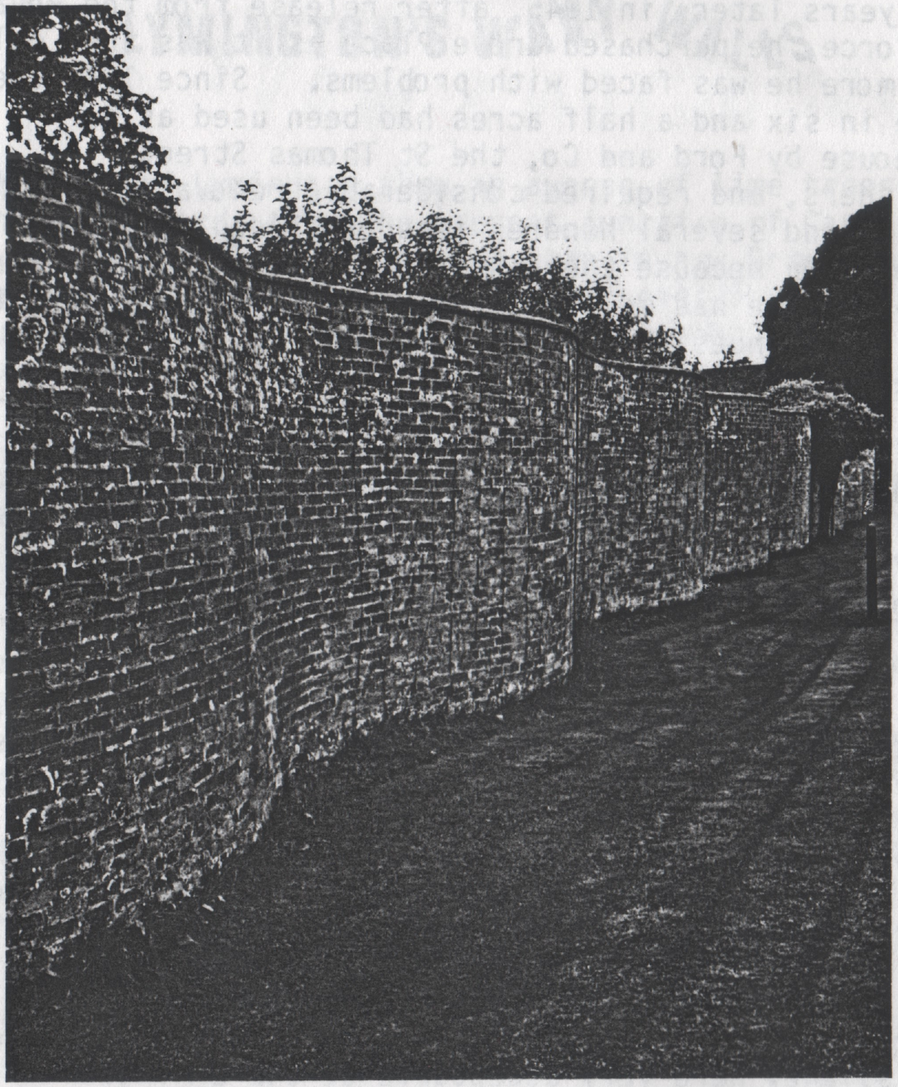
It is perhaps ironic that all that now remains of this beautiful and historic house is a distinctive wavy wall alongside Church Lane. This was the personal handiwork of its last resident owner, the author Dennis Wheatley. Commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery in September 1914, it was not until August 1917 that he received his first baptism of fire in the carnage of the Ypres Salient. Quartered in the garden of an old chateau, the building itself no more that a pile of rubble, he was driven to trying to build himself a shelter. On the November of a bitter winter, he moved in triumph from a flimsy bell-tent into his two-room shanty, only to be posted almost immediately.

Many years later, in 1945, after release from the Royal Air Force, he purchased Grove Place as it was then called. Once more he was faced with problems. Since 1940 the house in six and a half acres had been used as a warehouse by Ford and Co, the St Thomas Street furnishers, and required considerable renovation. The stables and several hundred feet of garden wall were pulled down because they interfered with his plans for the house. Time had mellowed these old Georgian bricks to such lovely hues that he determined to build a 200 ft long serpentine boundary wall.

The inspiration for this project was undoubtedly the splendid wavy wall of neighbouring Elm Grove House. Running down the west side of Church Lane this was built in 1798 by the commander of the garrison troops based in Lymington to defend it from the French.

The French had been a problem for years. After the French Revolution and the Republican Terror, large numbers of the nobility, and officers who embraced the Royalist cause, fled to southern England. With their numbers increasing daily, the government of the day chose to organise them into a number of Officer Corps charged with staging a counter-revolution. One of the first, known as the Loyal Emigrants, was based in Lymington. Their self-appointed task was to establish a bridgehead in Brittany and enlist the raw Breton peasants for insurrection. Well educated and with considerable social skills, they were very acceptable to the Lymington townspeople. Their parade ground was Broad Lane, and Elm Grove House was put at their disposal as a depot.

In June 1795 a fleet assembled off Yarmouth, I of W, loaded with everything needed to equip the new army to be raised in Brittany. The entire emigrant group was embarked from Lymington and set sail for Belle Ile and Quiberon Bay. Although naval control of the seas was absolute, bad weather resulted in complete disaster for the expedition. Hundreds were drowned or slaughtered on the shore. Those captured were carried off to the neighbouring town of Vannes where they were summarily shot by a battalion of the Volunteers of Paris.



Everton Grange Estate

Lymington was thus emptied of its French guests and all further plans for the invasion were abandoned. With the rise of Napoleon, in fact just the reverse was feared. And so into the vacuum were poured the coarse ill-disciplined Dutch and German mercenaries being brought over from the Continent by George III, as Hannover was subjugated by the French.

Such a misfortune to befall poor genteel Lymington was the direct result of a statute of William III in 1701. Following the death of the last of Queen Anne's 17 children, the Act of Settlement declared Sophia, the Electress of Hannover, and great grand-daughter of Mary, Queen of Scots, to be next in succession to the crown of Great Britain and Ireland. When she died in 1714 her eldest son, who could speak no English, became George I, thus establishing the House of Hannover, 1714 - 1901, a dynasty that was to rule the UK for almost two centuries. He was cruel and avaricious. His talented and beautiful wife Sophia Dorothea was imprisoned by him for 32 years, for an alleged infidelity, until her death at the age of 60. His own death in Holland in 1727 was the occasion for national rejoicing, He was followed by the drunken lecher George II, and in 1768 by George III who was finally certified as insane by 1811. But the Protestant succession had been assured !

It was the Hannoverian troops who took over the depot of the Loyal Emigrants in Church Lane, and the name of Hannover House still marks the spot. One of the first tasks of their Commander was to build a wall to screen their activities from the disapproving eyes of the townsfolk and so the wavy wall, a type of construction common in northern Germany, came to Lymington.

A conventional brick wall of any length, which is more than 6 ft high, must be of two bricks thickness for at least two-thirds of its height, or else be buttressed with pillars not more than 10ft apart. Even then there is a risk that in strong winds it may be blown over. The owners of Ramley House Nursing Home have twice in recent years seen their garden wall breached by falling trees and flattened by wind.

Yet a serpentine wall built of single bricks up to a height of 10ft can go for miles without a single pillar in it, and still stand up to a hurricane. The reason of course is that the curves impart strength in the same way as corrugations stiffen flat sheets of corrugated iron.

Early designs all followed a similar pattern with a wavelength of around 20ft and an amplitude of 1ft. Resolution of wind stresses suggest this gives a reduction of 25% in the overturning moment compared to a straight wall. The savings in bricks and mortar can be as high as 40%, but, as a debit, the construction of the curves demands more man-hours for a given length.

Not slow to recognise a good thing when they saw one, the locals embarked on a spate of similar wall construction. The catalyst for such activity was the ready availability of cheap labour in the shape of French prisoners of war.

Britain had been at war with France for 20 years, so the unfortunate captives, who had committed no crime, could pass from youth to middle age behind bars. Following capture they were usually brought to Portsmouth, then incarcerated either on the Isle of Wight, or in Hurst Castle. It was common to allow men out on ticket-of-leave to work in local gardens. As a consequence there are more wavy walls to be found in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight than in any other part of the country.

Sad scraps of these walls may be found to the south of Emsworth Road school, and the remains of boundary walls to the north of the High St, behind Woolworths, the Halifax Building Society and Hope Jones. The boundary walls of Fairfield House, demolished to make way for Courtenay Place, still provide a back-cloth to the enchanting garden of the Old Coach House. Closer to Hurst are the garden walls of Viddle Van Farmhouse in Lymore Lane, all of similar design and of the same period.

But the most beautiful example of all is to be found in the grounds of the old Everton Grange Estate. Here in a splendid setting is a garden enclosed on three sides. The major wall is 10ft high and 240 ft long with an east to west alignment, suggesting that it was built for the purpose of growing fruit. It was well known even in the 16th century that fruit trees would ripen up to four weeks earlier if protected from cold northerly winds by walls.

Sir Hugh Platt published a book "The Garden of Eden" in 1653 suggesting that Apricot trees be planted in tabernacles to promote early ripening. At Wroxall Abbey, which was bought by Sir Christopher Wren, there is a wall built in half circles similar to this proposal.

The wavy wall, being only half a brick thick, had additional advantages in that the heat of the sun passed right through to warm plants on the bleaker northern side. The lack of buttresses also made wiring easy, and walls angled outside the east-to-west orientation can still provide a south-facing wall if plants are not positioned in the centres of the curves.

The last known builder of a wavy wall in Lymington was a Mr. C. Vernon Waters of Pennington. In 1990 he was responsible for an 80ft stretch along Broad Lane to protect the garden of Broadcroft. His design was based on the ravaged 19th century walls of adjacent Little Lords Mead, but modified to meet the requirements of the site. It is one half-brick thickness throughout, and completely free of expansion joints. Plasticiser was added to the mortar mix in order to improve flexibility.

He confirms that material costs were 40% less than for a conventional wall but labour costs were a good deal higher. This arose largely from the need for additional plumb lines and a wooden template for setting out the curves. These are much gentler than those of the Wheatley wall higher up the lane. This had a wavelength of 16ft and an amplitude of 1ft 6ins. Theoretically deeper waves should give a stronger wall, though using more bricks and requiring more land.

That these wavy walls are an adornment to Lymington no-one would dispute. Whether the later designs are as functional we shall have to wait another 200 years to decide.

J.C. Taylor

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